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Jerry Seay
College of Charleston

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You Gotta Go to School for That?

Fearless Librarians and the River of Life

by Jerry Seay (College of Charleston)

Some folks say that when you are close to death your whole life passes before your eyes. Well, I'm here to tell you that is not true. Just the stupid stuff in your life runs through your mind.

A few of my friends and I planned for a whole year to take a three-day canoe trip down the Edisto river. The Edisto is one of those rivers in South Carolina famous for hidden snags, snakes, and alligators, not necessarily in that order. Of course, we were thinking only of the adventure. You know, sort of like what one thinks of just before going to library school.

Being the only librarian in the group, I naturally gravitated toward being the organizer and planner for this expedition. In other words, I got stuck with all the paperwork. But, with typical academic relish, I planned and schemed and organized until the day came to put the boats in the water and head down river into the unknown.

Though I greatly enjoy new adventures, I am not yet a true hardened jungle trail blazer. You see, "roughing it" to me usually involves a misadjusted air conditioner thermostat. Certainly librarians as a group are not known for their outdoorsman prowess. Let's face it, folks just don't think of librarians when they think of Indiana Jones. They think of people like firemen, welders, corrections officers, Wal-Mart managers, and wild-eyed publishers.

So I tried to make darned sure that I brought at least one of each with me on this trip. (Unfortunately, though, I was unable to locate any publisher to join me on this journey down alligator-infested waters. Go figure.)

Our first few hours down the black water river were relatively uneventful as we meandered around cypress trees, snags, and librarian unfriendly currents. Of course, as I took in the beautiful scenery my mind wandered to thoughts of library patron service

and Library of Congress subject headings. Yes, right!

The Wal-Mart manager and his dad paddled way ahead of us. It is the Wal-Mart way. Next came the canoe with my brother, the welder, and his friend the corrections officer. I was in a boat with my nephew Vince the fireman. In an effort to correct the fact that our canoe was last in line (a most unacceptable position for librarian or fireman), Vince and I double stroked to incredible speed and swept past my brother's canoe whose occupants were, for some reason, furiously back paddling. That's when we saw the tree. The fact that this tree was lying only a couple feet off the water did not nearly concern us as much as the fact that it was directly in front of us blocking three-fourths of the river. Our desperate paddling to avoid this looming obstacle only increased our speed and our consternation. Our canoe spun sideways in the swift current, and faster than a runaway book truck on an exit ramp, we slammed broadside hard into the tree. The canoe flipped over, throwing fireman, librarian, and gear into the drink. I was not pleased.

It is amazing the thoughts that come to mind when one is suddenly dumped into a cold, dark, alligator and snake infested river. In my mind I could see the headlines: "Librarian checks out for last time — drowns in wild river with fireman — no publisher in sight" or "Librarian loses arm to alligator — charged with mutilation of state property."


I surfaced next to my capsized canoe and two thoughts struck me. My wife will kill me if I drown out here, and now I'll never make deadline for my *ATG* article and Katina (my beloved editor) will kill me. Then, an underwater branch scraped off significant amounts of my leg hide, and I became focused on more immediate causes of expiration.



Hundreds of hours on the reference desk had hardened me against panic. Being surrounded by dozens of frantic, desperate, "my paper's due tomorrow" students had taught me how to be brave in the face of danger. However, never could I recall being fearful of being eaten by one of them. And, except for a freak incident with my office dehumidifier, drowning had never really been a concern in the library.

Despite this lack of immediate experience, like any good librarian, I took stock of my desperate situation, took immediate steps to preserve my life, and grabbed a nearby floating paddle and life jacket. Not having much further choice in the matter, Vince the fireman and I floated down river beside our canoe. The current eventually took us to a bank where we dragged ourselves, wet and exhausted, out of the river.

I suppose there is a great analogy here about going with the flow, fighting against the currents of life, or dealing with life's little turn overs. I, however, would certainly never stoop to such levels of trite analogy.

As fireman Vince and I pulled the last of our gear from the river, we noticed coolers, sleeping bags, paddles, and personal debris from my brother's canoe floating down the river. I guess, when going down the cosmic river of life, anybody can fall into the drink. At least one thing is certain; the canoeing abilities of welders and corrections officers are just as good as librarians and firemen. Hey, I guess that means we are all in the same boat! Ouch! 

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